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CULTURE AND EFFICIENCY THROUGH COMPOSITION

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Professor Lounsbury's article in *Harper's Magazine* (November, 1911) and its subsequent discussion in *The Nation* have brought again to the foreground the subject of rhetoric instruction. With regard to it, teachers seem to have divided themselves into two opposing ranks, the one, which seems to be centered at Yale, holding that the business of the professor of composition is to produce writers, the other, which is well represented at Harvard, holding that the best we can do for the Freshman student is to cultivate in him good language habits. The one division throws the emphasis on the inspiration of literature, recognizing that there can be no literary production without culture. The other party lays the stress upon painstaking drill in the writing of short themes, assuming that the average Freshman comes to the university with little knowledge of grammar and less of the organization of the paragraph and the composition. The one would develop a few geniuses by the systemic treatment of enriching thoughts and broadening experiences. The other would train a class full of Philistines prepared for the everyday needs of democracy, by enforcing good language habits, and increasing expressiveness. It is the old distinction between culture and efficiency.

The question arises as to whether these two positions are so incompatible as they might at first seem. Might we not agree with each of these parties, but go a step farther than either; indeed, if such be possible, combine the purpose of both in pursuance of a still higher aim? Culture, indeed, is good until it reaches the point of dilettantism and becomes a self-centered striving for exquisite agonies of the soul. And efficiency is good unless carried to the extreme of impersonal system and administrative machinery that is rife in many of our state institutions today. But each is dependent upon the other. We are too prone to culture ourselves out of

all usefulness, or to let our vague search for efficiency defeat its own purpose by abnormally developing the obvious exterior to the detriment of that which is within. After all, is not the purpose of education to enable us to live, and are we not safe in concluding that in the last analysis the most efficient life is that which is cultured, and the most cultured that which is at the same time efficient?

If this be so, the study of language composition, whether it begins with literature and works back to principles, or begins with principles and works up to literature, should furnish both viewpoint and methods of procedure; it should develop in students a healthy spirit of investigation by opening to them one of the many gates to the "world of thought and law, of marvels and of mysteries, of moral beauty and ideal truth, beginning haply where they had hoped all need for effort ended"; and it should at the same time regulate the field of their investigations by the needs of the democracy in which they live. The pure efficiency method falls short in so far as it causes students to look upon the study of composition as a "stupid grind," and introduces into our faculties an abnormal race of men colloquially known at Harvard as "rhetoric slaves." The pure cultural method is weak in so far as it ignores the practical needs of life by confining the material of its culture to a vague literary interpretation, or leaves its natural field to teach the student the art of seeing and the philosophy of thinking independent of their bearing upon language composition. True, the Freshman must be taught his syntax; but this alone is apt to be dull and uninteresting, and "To grow by any study, we must admire, be touched, perceive the latent charm, not merely be able to dissect and reconstruct the outer framework."¹ True also, he must be trained to think and appreciate, but why isolate this culture from life, or from the study of the language composition as an expression of life?

That there is an increasing tendency at present to view language not as an independent organism, but as immediately connected with life, and hence to view language composition no longer as a system

¹ James Rhoades, *The Training of the Imagination* (John Lane Co., New York, 1908), p. 35.

of rules but as a subject for investigation was illustrated at the last meeting of The Modern Language Association (Chicago, December 26-29, 1911) in a paper read by Dr. David Blondheim, in which he declares that language study should be carried on in connection with psychology, philosophy, history, and kindred sciences. This tendency is but another expression of the general scientific movement that is alive today, for as President Hutchins of Michigan has said, "Science has surely come to its own not only in the realm of speculation and theory, but in the practical affairs of life as well."¹ More and more rhetoric instruction is losing its nature as a drill in the tabulated language superstitions of the old generation, and turning its endeavor to a sane investigation of the facts of language expression and composition. The old textbooks of formal rhetoric are being supplanted by scholarly works of historical research, revealing absurdities in our grammatic dogmas, by philosophical essays dealing in a popular way with the fundamental principles of literature, and by careful psychological studies into the act of composition as practiced by great writers. The proverbial rhetoric instructor is breaking away from the staid ways of the dogmatic pedagogue and is beginning to thaw a little, to throw life into a subject that was once considered dull but necessary, by imbuing his students with the contagion of scientific investigation. Principles of literature, once thought so ethereal and significant, are now being brought into vital connection with practical life by the formation of schools of journalism and departments for the developing of playwrights. Everywhere fatherly advice and dogmatic statement of rule are beginning to make way for a scholarly investigation which shall be sane and practical.

Interesting as is this present-day movement as manifested in the application of scientific methods to the various phases of language composition, the fact, of course, remains that writing is an art and not a science. To be sure, it furnishes ample ground for research productive of results at once instructive and inspiring, but an art it remains nevertheless. It is quite possible that our

¹ H. B. Hutchins, "Progressiveness in Higher Education," *New York Times*, October 14, 1911.

newborn enthusiasm may obscure this fact, and that we may for a while be tempted to lay too much stress on our psychology and philology, but this is perhaps but one of the natural excesses of a flood-tide and therefore to be expected. The principal importance to be attached to the invasion of scientific methods in the field of art, wherever it occurs, is to be found in the corrective and disturbing influences which it brings with it. Crystallization in any art is detrimental, as is illustrated by the degeneracy that occurs in groups of painters after their conscious organization into schools. When workable principles become traditions, and traditions become superstitions, science steps in and tells us that our precious hobbies are not laws at all but only rubbish, reminding us rather forcibly at times that we must "move along" lest we block the way of progress.

We naturally ask, then, what are some of the corrective influences which the present scientific movement is applying to the study and instruction of language composition. Perhaps these can be summed up specifically in the observation that the composition instructor is at present striving for too immediate results. He may go into raptures over the delicacies of Shakespeares before rows of students staring at him with dumb faces, and he may hear them repeat after him his own formulas of admiration; but learning to write or to appreciate is the work of years, not of semesters. He may, by a process of hot-house breeding, teach his Freshmen to talk in sentences or to write whole paragraphs without a grammatical blunder, but he should not be surprised at having the exquisite pleasure of hearing the same students, as Seniors, say "I done it," or "I seen it." Freshman composition is but a step in the student's development. Why then should the rhetoric instructor take upon his shoulders so huge a responsibility as to hold himself sponsor for all that the student writes or says? Why then this mad rush to cram the student's brain with rules and principles that he has not time in the natural process of growth to assimilate? Why this stringent requirement to have him mechanically construct (or have his roommate construct for him) more themes than he can interestedly compose and carefully revise, or than his instructor can personally appreciate and constructively criticize? If he is

to become a great writer or even a careful speaker, he must be made so by the concentration of all of the forces of the university upon his development.

And if this be so, what bearing does it have upon our two methods of culture and efficiency? Merely this, that if the efficiency method is to be efficient, it must take time to cultivate, and if the cultural method is to furnish real culture, it must resuscitate itself and, like Rip Van Winkle, come down from its mountain to join its life with the life of the time. We may be going forward, we know we are moving, and rhetoric instruction, if it is not to block the general progress, must get in step with the procession.